

Factors influencing post-breakup recovery: A review of relationship dynamics, individual differences, and therapeutic interventions

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Abstract. Romantic breakup is a universal experience, but its psychological and emotional consequences vary significantly among individuals. This review synthesizes empirical findings on key factors influencing post-breakup recovery, including relationship-specific variables, individual differences, and sociocultural contexts. Studies indicate that initiators typically recover faster, while continued contact with ex-partners prolongs distress, with notable gender differences. Therapeutic interventions such as play therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), and acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) show efficacy in alleviating breakup-related distress. However, their effectiveness can differ based on cultural background and personal differences. Current research is limited by its reliance on Western student samples and cross-sectional designs. Future studies should adopt longitudinal approaches, diversify participants, and explore stage-specific recovery processes to inform culturally adaptive interventions. This review underscores the need for personalized, evidence-based strategies to support post-breakup adjustment and resilience.

1 Introduction

Breakups in romantic relationships are nearly a universal experience. However, the psychological and emotional consequences after a breakup vary among individuals. While breakups are often viewed as temporary setbacks, research indicates that they can trigger profound distress, including symptoms of depression and anxiety, and even a decline in physical health [1,2]. Given the prevalence and impact of breakups, understanding the factors that influence recovery after a breakup is crucial for clinical practice and public health. Nevertheless, the existing literature remains fragmented, with studies focusing narrowly on relational variables (e.g., initiator status, relationship length), individual differences (e.g., attachment styles, history of trauma), or socio-cultural contexts (e.g., social support, religious norms), and rarely integrating these perspectives. Moreover, despite an increasing amount of evidence suggesting the efficacy of therapeutic interventions (e.g. CBT, compassion-focused therapy), their applicability across different populations remains to be explored.

This article seeks to bridge these gaps by integrating empirical findings on the following aspects: key predictive factors for breakup adjustment, gender and cultural differences in the

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recovery process, and the effectiveness of interventions. By comprehensively examining these dimensions, the goal is to provide clinicians and researchers with a nuanced framework to support individuals navigating post-relationship loss. The analysis also highlights critical limitations of the current research, such as an over-reliance on Western sample, and calls for more inclusive longitudinal studies to inform culturally adaptive recovery strategies. This review emphasizes that breakup recovery is a multifaceted phenomenon requiring personalized, evidence-based approaches.

2 Literature review

Multiple theoretical frameworks explain the emotional distress following relationship dissolution. Rando's (1993) Six R's of Mourning outlines a structured progression through six stages (i.e. Recognizing the loss, Reacting to separation, Recollecting and re-experiencing, Relinquishing attachments, Readjusting, and Reinvesting), each categorized into three emotional processing phases: avoidance, confrontation, and integration. Alternatively, Kübler-Ross's grief stage theory proposes a non-linear emotional adaptation process involving denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance [3].

3 Potential factors for affecting recovery

A non-divorce breakup is an extremely emotional experience for a person. People will have many strong emotions, such as distress, betrayal, and regret, accompanied by physical reactions, such as loss of appetite, trembling, and heartache. Some people may also experience symptoms of depression after a breakup. However, it is common that some people may have less emotional fluctuations after a breakup. Different people have various psychological and physical response to breakup, and similarly, the time they need for recovery are different. One of the possible reasons is the relationship itself, like the duration of the relationship, the way of breaking up, and the interaction after the breakup. Sometimes, individual differences also lead to distinct duration of recovery, for example, personalities and attachment style. According to Bowlby, the duration of recovery vary by attachment style, with securely attached individuals exhibiting faster emotional recovery compared to those with anxious or avoidant attachment patterns [4]. The last factor is different social environments, such as social support and cultural background [4]. For further explanation, social support from families or friends may lead to different consequences so that the time for people to recover from separation distress would be divergent. People from different cultural backgrounds receive distinct education and hold different perspectives on romantic relationships, which leads to varying difficulty for them to recover from breakups.

According Locker and his colleagues, some typical variables related to the relationship itself would lead to the duration of recovery after breakup from romantic relationship [2]. This study summarized eight potential factors and explored gender differences. The eight factors are initiator role, availability of social support, duration of the relationship, daily time spent together, level of romantic feelings, time before starting a new relationship, number of past romantic partners, and frequency of contact with the ex-partner after breakup [2]. The initiator of breakup would achieve emotional recovery of a breakup faster than those who passively accept the breakup because they will have less self-doubt. Additionally, there was not much empirical research on the differences between men and women in the initiative of breaking up. Under the same attachment style, social support did not have much effect on recovery. For gender difference, women would receive more support than men. Keeping in touch with previous boyfriend/girlfriend in any way makes it harder for them to overcome

distress of breakup. The number of previous relationships was proportional to their confidence in dealing with negative moods after a breakup. There was little research on the duration of relationship, but it could be predicted that the longer a romantic relationship lasts, the more dependent both parties were on each other, and the more difficult it was to recover. The higher the level of contact or intimacy in a relationship, and the more integrated the lives of both parties were, the harder it was to recover from a breakup. Talking about love itself, men were more romantic and idealistic than women about the concept of love, which has a greater impact on recovery. Re-entering a new relationship after a breakup may help people adjust their previous grief, which had no research investigated the gender difference. The study recruited 116 college undergraduates, among whom the ratio of males to females was basically the same, covering a wide range of ages, from 18 to 40, and the participants were not limited to white people. The experiment explored the potential factors that affect their recovery from a breakup, and asked in detail about the potential factors that were previously predicted to affect recovery, such as initiator status, whether the breakup was shared with others, the times they saw their ex boyfriend/girlfriend after the breakup, and how long they dated after the breakup. The results showed that in the early stage of the breakup, the more frequently men saw their previous girlfriend, the faster they recovered, while it was opposite to women. Another finding was that recovery after a breakup was related to the speed of entering a new relationship, and could promote recovery to a certain extent. Research also revealed that increased dating frequency correlated positively with men's recovery time, yet negatively with women's recovery time. The reason was that women are better at evaluating the positive and negative aspects of a relationship, which is inconsistent with previous research results. This study mainly explored the differences in the relationship itself, and paid less attention to individual differences, such as differences in each person's personality and different attachment styles caused by childhood experiences. At the same time, there were few research on the approach of separation. Different approaches of proposing a breakup may lead to different outcomes, which contribute to different recovery period.

Compared with Field's experiment, in addition to exploring who initiated the breakup, the time after the breakup, and whether they have entered the next relationship, the researchers also studied whether the participants felt sudden or unpredictable, whether they felt betrayed or rejected, depression, anxiety, intrusive thoughts, difficulty controlling intrusive thoughts, sleep conditions, and views on the relationship before the breakup [1]. The researchers invited 283 college students with an average age of 21.3 years old, including 192 people who had experienced a breakup and 91 people who had not experienced a breakup. Participants were required to complete different scales, including scales for measuring physical health conditions such as sleep quality and scales for measuring psychological health conditions, for example depression and anxiety. After finishing a breakup distress scale, participants are separated into two groups (i.e. high-distress and low-distress group). In general, the high-distress group had higher intrusive thoughts and found it more difficult to control those thoughts. At the same time, they perceived the breakup as unexpected, resulting in a sense of betrayal and rejection. For psychological symptoms, the high-distress group was reported more severe sleep disorders, depression and anxiety symptoms. This study considered more variables that affecting duration of recovery, compared to Locker's study. However, the limitation still exists. The sample was mainly Hispanic women, the study might not be generalized to other conditions.

According to Tran and other researchers, the quality of the relationship before breakup also determines the difficulty of recovery to a certain extent [5]. Compared with negative experiences, people with more positive emotional experiences relieved faster after the breakup, and with less distress and guilt. However, if serious infidelity or violence occurred,

the victims in the relationship would recovered faster, and the people who cause these problems would have more uncomfortable emotional experiences. This study also focused on variables in relationships (i.e. quality of the relationship before breakup), with less attention paid to individual differences.

Apart from focus on relationship itself, individual differences and culture background also contributed to recovery. The new experiment conducted by van der Watt, tested the relationship between sociodemographic factors, childhood adversity, lifetime trauma exposure, and distress after breakup [6]. Researchers invited emerging adult students from developing countries in South Africa to participate in the experiment, in order to fill the gap in group research in low- and middle-income countries. The experiment invited students aged from 18 to 25 required to complete a Life Events Checklist (LEC), a Adverse Childhood Experiences questionnaire (ACE), and a Breakup Distress Scale (BDS). All data were integrated using SPSS, and Pearson's correlation and ANOVAs were used for data analysis. The results of the study found that religious orientation was closely related to the sadness of breaking up, which further leads to the difficulty of recovery, and students who self-identify as other sexual orientations (i.e. homosexual, bisexual) also have a higher degree of pain. Finally, regarding adversity, which combining LEC and ACE test results, previous trauma's exposure and breakup pain are also related to a certain extent [6]. Most of the participants in this study were women, which may lead to biased experimental data. Furthermore, the influencing factors of religion are too broad, which may include plenty of confounding variables. Based on Tran's research findings, except for the similar results with previous research, a new funding was that higher education status can also lead to more distress feeling after breakup [5]. Romantic breakup recovery is influenced by a combination of relationship-specific factors (i.e. initiator status, relationship duration, post-breakup contact), individual differences (i.e. attachment style, trauma history), and sociocultural context (i.e. social support, culture background, religious beliefs). Studies consistently find that initiators recover faster, while frequent ex-partner contact typically prolongs distress, though gender differences exist. However, limitations include over-reliance on western student samples, self-report biases, and insufficient attention to cultural variations and breakup methods.

4 Intervention for recovery

After discussing the factors that influence individual's recovery from a breakup, scholars also explored strategies for addressing these negative emotions. As demonstrated by Shekhani et al., the study explored the effect on play therapy of alleviating breakup distress for individuals who experienced a non-marital breakup [7]. The experiment recruited 18 adults aged from 18 to 30 years old through purposive sampling, including 5 men and 15 women. Participants were divided into intervention group and control group. People in intervention group were asked to complete six weeks of play therapy with one last time for summary, while the control group did not receive any interventions. Seven intervention phases included establishing a baseline and measuring the level of distress and depression through a standardized scale, expressing emotions related to the breakup, re-frame and re-examining the relationship, sever emotional ties, establishing a new identity while expanding social network, turning the remaining emotions into self-care, and re-evaluating the degree of pain and depression. After the intervention, participants reported a significant decrease of distress level. These creative therapeutic methods facilitated participants' emotional expression and self-disclosure. Study applied some relaxation techniques, such as meditation and self-care toolkits, which have a positive effect on reducing the distress of breakup. The limitation for this study is that sample size was relatively small, which is not enough to generalize this treatment method, and it also

ignored individual differences. Additionally, control group did not receive any treatment, which may affect the result because of the placebo effect. This intervention may need to be coordinated with other therapeutic techniques in the future.

In addition to using play therapy, compassion-focused therapy also has a certain effect on negative emotions after breaking up. Soltani and other researchers studied the effectiveness of compassion-focused therapy on depression after breaking up [8]. The experiment used targeted sampling to select three women who had just experienced a breakup and conducted eight 90-minute sessions. Moreover, they needed to complete the Love Trauma Inventory (LTI) and the MMPI-2RF questionnaires before intervention to understand their current emotional state, and complete the other two tests, Beck Depression Inventory (BDI-II) and Rumination (RRS) questionnaires, at second, fourth, sixth, and eighth weeks. The results showed that compassion-focused therapy reduced their depression and emotional rumination, and they were able to view themselves with a more compassionate state after the treatment. Additionally, researchers also conducted another experiment, they selected three women through convenient sampling. To explore the effectiveness of compassion-focused therapy on anxiety after a breakup, they had to complete three forms, which were Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI), Love Trauma Inventory (LTI) and the Minnesota Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire (MMPI 2-RF), undergoing eight 90-minute treatments. As demonstrated by results, all three participants were cured to some extent, so it could be explained that this intervention was useful for anxiety after a breakup [9]. However, the sample size of this experiment was relatively small, similar to the previous experiment. Furthermore, there was not enough evidence to prove that this intervention effect can also be applied to other conditions. Reliability may decreased due to no control group.

According to Singh, this article proposed many psychological recovery strategies after a breakup or divorce, and applied relevant empirical research to prove the feasibility of the strategy [10]. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) changed negative self-evaluations through cognitive reconstruction, thereby reducing symptoms of depression or anxiety. Relevant empirical research shows that CBT can improve the ability to cope with negative emotions compared to other treatments. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) encouraged people to accept their emotions after a breakup rather than avoid them. Studies have shown that ACT can reduce psychological distress and increase a person's flexibility in dealing with grief after a breakup. Mindfulness meditation cultivates present-moment awareness and enhances emotional regulation capacity. Empirical evidence further demonstrates that robust social support systems facilitate post-breakup recovery, with individuals embedded in strong social networks exhibiting reduced psychological distress. The article also mentions some suggestions for personal growth, such as self-reflection and identity reconstruction, setting boundaries, and setting a new life. As for the limitations of this article, most of the empirical studies use western participants, and there is a lack of research from different cultural backgrounds.

5 Discussion

While the study reviewed in this article primarily adopts a cross-sectional approach, it does not capture the longitudinal progression of post-breakup recovery. Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs to better understand this dynamic process. Current cross-sectional studies are limited to comparing different individuals' states after a breakup, without thoroughly examining the substantial individual variations in breakup experiences. Drawing parallels to the established Kübler-Ross's five-stage grief model, each individual may require distinct recovery timelines and specific interventions at different stages [3]. Future studies

could classify participants according to these grief stages and employ data analysis to determine the typical recovery duration for each phase, followed by investigations into stage-appropriate intervention strategies.

The current sample predominantly consists of college students, which may limit the generalizability of findings. To address this limitation, future research should broaden participant recruitment to include underrepresented populations such as East Asian communities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and different age groups including middle-aged and older adults. Expanding the research scope in this manner would provide a more comprehensive understanding of breakup recovery across diverse populations.

6 Conclusion

The breakup of romantic relationships represents a crucial psychological transition, characterized by emotional distress and temporary impairment of psychological functioning. Through a comprehensive synthesis of current researches, this investigation indicates the multifaceted determinants shaping post-breakup adaptation, encompassing three primary domains: relationship-specific parameters including termination initiator role and partnership longevity, person-level characteristics such as attachment orientation and regulatory approaches, and broader contextual influences, including societal support systems and cultural frameworks. Key findings suggest that while some individuals recover relatively quickly, others experience prolonged difficulties, particularly when lacking social support or when pre-existing vulnerabilities such as insecure attachment or prior trauma are present.

From cognitive behavioral therapy to acceptance and commitment therapy, these reviewed interventions have shown promise in promoting recovery, but their effectiveness may vary based on individual needs and cultural backgrounds. Notably, the gender differences in recovery models highlight the importance of tailored support, as women often benefit more from emotional processing, while men tend to gain more from organized social reintegration. Despite these insights, key gaps still exist. Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs to track recovery trajectories over time and diversify samples to include underrepresented populations, such as non-Western, LGBTQ+, and elderly individuals. Additionally, studies should explore the role of emerging factors, such as the use of digital media, in post-breakup adjustment. Clinically, combining evidence-based interventions with culturally sensitive practices can enhance support for those coping with breakup-related distress. Recognizing that recovery from breakups is a multifaceted and personalized process can inform more effective interventions, reduce stigma, and promote resilience. By bridging the gap between research and practice, this work contributes to a deeper understanding of how individuals recover from heartbreak and underscores the pathways to growth after a breakup.

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